**A Farewell to Arms: The Theme of Disillusionment in A Farewell To Arms**

*R. Moore discusses the prominent theme of disillusionment in the novel through the character of Frederick.*

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the theme of disillusionment in Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. One critic has called the novel “a parable of twentieth-century man’s disgust and disillusionment at the failure of civilization to achieve the ideals it had been promising throughout the nineteenth century”;(1) while others, including Carlos Baker, tend to see in the novel a contrast between two different types of twentieth century life, symbolized by the chaos of war and the serenity of peace. Both viewpoints take into consideration the theme of disillusionment, for both focus upon Lt. Henry and his journey into war, out of it in search of peace and love, and ultimately towards the cruel irony of Catherine’s death.

The title of the novel should give us a hint as to the process of disillusionment which Frederick undergoes, for it literally signifies both his rejection of his personal responsibility for the war and his final loss of Catherine. It is difficult to trace the roots of the former in Frederick’s character, for Hemingway characteristically does not provide extensive background information. We know only that he has a family in the States, has studied architecture, and decided to enter the war as an ambulance driver for the Italians. There is an aspect of unconsciousness about him which tends to make us believe that he does not feel things deeply, but this is apparently not the case: “I never think, yet when I begin to talk I say things I have found out in my head without thinking.”(2) Thus Frederick is a man quite capable of contemplation, as he is of action. It is not until he is wounded and thus deprived of the possibility of action that the process of disillusionment begins to set in, and even then it occurs under strange circumstances. For his stay in the hospital with the proximity to Catherine, the eventual freedom to go out to the races and on small trips with her, contrasts sharply with the brutality of the war. Just before being injured, Frederick thinks to himself: “I knew I would not be killed. Not in this war. It did not have anything to do with me.” Thus the injury, which could easily have been fatal, is the first event to shake Frederick’s naive faith in his invulnerability. The second is his affair with Catherine, the first woman he has loved, for it leaves him open to her, to her legitimate demands for a life together away from the war.

Frederick slowly discovers that there is a basic opposition between his life-affirming love for Catherine and the death-drift of the war. Yet there is a traditional and conservative side to Frederick which recoils from the notion of desertion and its implications to others of cowardice. As Frederick moves towards a rejection of the war, he also moves towards a reconciliation within himself between his thoughts and actions. Thus, he hopes to be totally free of his part in the war: “I would never see any of them now. That life was over.” The “separate peace” for which he opts is declared privately, for he is not interested in convincing anyone else of the validity of his decision but rather hopes to be left alone to allow his love with Catherine to absorb him completely.

Frederick has come almost to his decision in the hospital, yet he returns to duty on the front. And there he is almost killed by those very soldiers he has been risking his life to save. There can be no further question of duty or honor. Frederic runs and escapes by diving into the Taglimento. This escape has been rightly seen as a type of baptism for Frederick, for it marks his final conversion to the peace of a life alone with Catherine away from the war.(3) Frederick never loses his ironic viewpoint, for the process of disillusionment gradually extends from the war to ordinary life. Even with Catherine, he finds death the only concrete element in his philosophy: “The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these, you can be sure it will kill you, too, but there will be no special hurry.”

In many ways, Frederick’s disillusionment involves both a loss of selfishness and a growing strength in dealing with his owns desires and Catherine. Yet he also, having escaped from the trap of the war, feels “trapped biologically” by Catherine and her pregnancy. Frederick grows to realize that it is only inside of himself, with no reference to either Catherine or the war, that he can find a peaceful center. Thus the disillusionment with the moral and political situation in the war spreads into his personal relationship with Catherine, and we note some cooling on his part toward her as if she too might turn against him. It is interesting to note that Hemingway contrasts Frederick’s disillusionment with ideas such as that of duty, and emotions such as love with the simple pleasures which he pursues throughout the book. Thus, he turns constantly to his whisky and his feed from the very beginning to the end. Even when Catherine lies dying in the hospital, Frederick goes out for a drink or a meal and is careful to record this fact, for it represents perhaps the only reliable and secure pleasure for him. This is, of course, a damning observation upon the rewards of civilized life by Hemingway. In this connection, we should note that Henry loves Catherine most when they make love and is somewhat uncertain the rest of the time. Again, he has come to trust only the concrete aspects of life, for he has found neither security nor pleasure in ideals.

Frederick Henry never really believed that death would touch him, no matter how much he joked about it. He believed that the very concreteness of his love for Catherine, in the form of their expected child, was a sign that they both would be spared in a world gone mad. But in such a world there is no assurance that a “dirty trick” will not be played, and it is. The child dies. Catherine dies. Frederick is left with absolutely nothing. “But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn’t any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue.”

The process of disillusionment is complete. It is not based only upon the horrors of war but also upon the absurdity of the universe. Frederick matures during the course of the novel, but it is a maturity which merely prepares him to accept further tragedy and pain. The reader of this novel easily understands Gertrude Stein’s comment that Hemingway and his friends were members of and were writing about a “lost generation.”

**Notes**  
1. Ray B. West, Jr., “Ernest Hemingway: *A Farewell to Arms*,” in *Sewanee Revew*, LV (Winter, 1945) p. 120.

2. [Ernest Hemingway](http://www.enotes.com/authors/ernest-hemingway) *A Farewell to Arms* (New York, 1957). All quotations from the novel are from this edition.

3. West, p. 125.

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